

# The Good Lay Life of the Buddhist and the Role of Sīla therein

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The lay community in Buddhism, according to the statements of the Buddha himself, stands in marked contrast to the *bhikkhus* or the community of monks who have taken to a life of renunciation or *pabbajjā*. The contrast here, we must clarify at the very outset, is not in terms of the goal they aspire to but in terms of the way they propose to achieve it and the intensity of their application. Let us have this confirmed direct from the Sutta Nipāta [Sn. v. 221 / Munisutta v. 15]. Here it is:

Just as the blue-necked peacock that flies in the sky  
Never equals in speed the swan.  
In like manner the lay folk shall never compare  
With the monk who muses in solitude in the wilds.

Translated by the author

*Sikhī yathā nīlagīvo vihaṅgamo*  
*Hamsassa nopeti jvaṃ kudācanaṃ*  
*Evaṃ gihī nānukaroti bhikkhuno*  
*Munino vivittassa vanamhi jhāyato ti.*

This makes it quite clear that the Buddhist, whether monk or lay person, has only one specific goal to aspire for, in order to be liberated from the ills of *samsāric* continuance. Thus it becomes very much a challenge between *samsāra* and Nirvana. This unmistakable vision of what every Buddhist wishes to reach in the end, sooner or later, namely Nirvana, has to be doubtlessly clear to everyone of us before we undertake anything in the name of religion.

In introducing his religion to the world, the Buddha repeatedly tells us that he has only two things to talk about, i.e. 1. the presence of *dukkha* in the world and 2. its termination or *nirodha*. In the Alagaddūpama Sutta [MN.I.p.140], this is what he pointedly tells us. "Now as well as formerly, I make known the existence of *dukkha* in the world and its termination": *Pubbe cā ' haṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañ c' eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ*. This *dukkha*, he tells us, is the sum total of the human predicament: *kicchaṃ vatā ' yam loko āpanno*.

It is summed up as 1. That we are born into a state of existence here: *jāyati ca*. 2. That we mature with age and consequently decay in the process: *jīyati ca*. 3. That we die in one life here: *mīyati ca*. [This, we don't believe at all implies here a moment to moment death or *ksaṇika maraṇa*]. 4. That we also in the normal run of events pass over from one phase of existence here to yet another: *cavati ca*. [This is what is unmistakably implied by *punabbhava*] 5. And in that new existence [*punabbhava*], we are born again: *uppajjati ca* [DN.II.30 ; SN.II. 5]. Do not fail to note that this last item No. 5 of 'being born again and again' is highlighted in the statement *dukkhā jāti punappunam*: Being **born again and again** is painful.

In the face of these statements, how do serious scholars and at times less serious students of Buddhism fail to see here the process of rebirth and *samsāric* continuance stretching out through time and space, and attempt to explain all these as taking place in one life time, between birth and death? It is this recurrence and repetition which makes the Buddha call this human life process of *samsāra* of each one to be painfully endless. Referred to earlier as *Kicchaṃ vatā ' yaṃ loko āpanno* and further described as *Anamataggā ' yam bhikkhave samsāro pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjānīvaraṇānam sattānaṃ taṇhāsamojjanānaṃ sandhāvataṃ saṃsarataṃ* = This *samsāra*, O monks, is infinitely long. Its first beginning is hardly discernible. It is so to people who are wrapped up in ignorance and are bound up by craving and are therefore speeding up and rolling along [SN.II.178 Translated by the author.].

Unless and until one begins to view life with these massive dimensions in mind as explained in Buddhism, instead of looking out for scientific proof for reality of rebirth, one cannot hope to take up with adequate seriousness either Buddhist ethics or Buddhist philosophy. We believe it is this vastness of vision regarding the life continuity of humans that has given the religious ethics of Buddhism its unassailable validity and viability. It is from this angle that I have chosen to address you this evening. I have phrased it as the good life of laymen and laywomen. While it includes even those who have chosen a life of renunciation, let us restrict our study here to those in the household or those whom we choose to call the lay community. They are Buddhists indeed, but we work with them within a restricted perimeter.

More recent studies on Buddhism undertaken by us have brought me very close to a subject which has a very down to earth relevance to the lives we lead today, not only in Sri Lanka, but the world over. It is the relationship in which the humans, with their diverse origins, stand to one another. With a remarkable vividness it is said that unless and until we reduce and remove from the hearts of humans the complementary evils of dread and fear on the one hand, and hatred and hostility on the other, men and women shall have neither peace nor prosperity in their lives here. These are called the five dreads or *pañca bhayāni* and the five hatreds or *pañca verāni*.

What interests us here as Buddhists is to note that the teachings around these two topics of dreads and hatreds or *bhayāni* and *verāni* center essentially on the concept of *pañca-sīla* or the **Observance of the Five Precepts**. Anguttara Nikāya [AN.III.204 ff.] identifies these two sets of *bhayāni* and *verāni* as being related to the five acts of evil forbidden under the *pañca-sīla*. Or more precisely, as being related to the breach of any one of the five injunctions of the *pañca-sīla*. The state of *bhayāni* which are presented first in the quotations cited here, we would explain as dread, fear or terror. They seem to arise in the human mind as a reaction to or a consequence of an action, say like killing or stealing,

undertaken by one in violation of any one of the Five Precepts. We would therefore call the genesis or origin of **bhayāni** as a reactive process. The passages quoted here from the Anguttara Nikaya take these as reacting on the doer himself [*Pāṇātipātī pāṇātipātapaccayā ditṭhadhammikaṃ bhayaṃ veraṃ pasavati*. AN. IV. 405 f.]

**Verāni** as the second member in the listing is always referred to jointly with **bhayāni**. To us, **verāni** meaning enmity, hostility and anger, seems to imply a more active and positive process of building up psychic phenomena, by the doer of the action himself. But unfortunately, not of the healthy type. On this active side, we are inclined to believe that the breach of any one of the five injunctions of the **pañca-sīla**, primarily involves one in an injury to society, i.e. to other fellow beings, either individually or collectively [*paravyābādhāya samvattati*]. Hence we should have no difficulty in determining the identity of this group presented as **verāni**. The evils listed under **pañca-sīla** are clearly anti-social and are likewise inimical to everyone around us. **Verāni** are clearly doubly ruinous. What a delightful endeavor to build healthy inter-personal relationships among the humans at a very sensible down-to-earth level.

Once again the Anguttara Nikāya [AN. IV. 405f.] presents to us a very clear study of these twin items of **bhayāni** and **verāni**. The Buddha is seen telling the Banker Anāthapiṇḍika that foremost among the prerequisites for the attainment of the first stage of emancipation or *sotāpatti*, is the complete elimination or riddance of these [*ariyasāvakaṃ pañca bhayāni verāni vūpasantān*]. Explaining these two as being of conjoint origin, the Buddha explains that anyone who violates anyone of the precepts of **pañca-sīla** 'Acquires or generates within himself [*pasavati*] on that account **bhaya** and **vera** in this very life ' [*pāṇātipātī pāṇātipātapaccayā ditṭhadhammikaṃ bhayaṃ veraṃ pasavati*]. In addition, he acquires these for his next life [*samparāyikaṃ*] as well. In consequence of this, he also gets to suffer [*paṭisaṃvedeti*] mental agony and displeasure [*cetasikaṃ pi dukkhaṃ domanassaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti*.] This is the definition of **bhaya** and

*vera*.

Viewing these two concepts from a very general worldly angle, we see them as psychopathic states, generated by man on his own seeking. It is true today, more than ever before, that in the world of humans, much more than in the jungle, humans are a source of dread and fear to those around. In our attitudes and aspirations, we generate in others suspicion, fear and uncertainty about their own safety and security. In these cases, we often shield ourselves by putting forward a theory of safeguarding our interests: our own positions as well as possessions. It is claimed to be our right of self-defense or defensive action. Nevertheless, they do generate within us a great deal of enmity and hostility [*vera*] towards others and in others a great deal of dread and fear [*bhaya*] towards us. These two seem to go around in the world in a vicious circular movement. Each one's own bad behavior creates these states in society as reactions.

But more often, and more positively, we also deny others their basic rights to live and to own what they have legitimately earned. In these we go further to become aggressive and offensive. These turn out to be acts of hostility and enmity. Thus they come to be called *verāni*. This is seen happening both in peace and war. It is this degeneracy of our respect for human rights, whether at domestic, national or international levels, which brought about the need for the declaration of the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights at a global level. This came about as a remedial measure in the wake of the disastrous corrosion of human ethics which was witnessed during World War II.

On the reactive side, the commission of these evil deeds seems to boomerang on the doer himself. Any single breach of the *pañca-sīla*, being anti-social, hostile and inimical, is also self-corrosive, and by itself generates self-injury [*attavyābādhāya samvattati*]. The Anguttara Nikāya text goes further to say that anyone who is unable to give up or get rid of these [*bhayāni* and *verāni* / *appahāya pañca verāni*] would be deemed here in this very life to be a morally

unwholesome person or *dussīlo* and that he is destined to suffer degradation, i.e. birth in hell or a state of woe, in his life after death [*Pañca gahapti bhayāni verāni appahāya dussīlo itī vuccati nirayañ ca upapajjati*. loc.cit.].

It is these two considerations of social injury and self-injury which the Buddha upheld as criteria for judging the moral and ethical goodness of one's actions in society. This is how the Buddha himself instructed his own son Rahula, as a young monk, with regard to moral rectitude [MN.I.416] as a vital ingredient on one's path to liberation in Nirvana. Thus we see here the ethical concepts of Buddhism to be beautifully developed to possess both a down-to-earth local and social relevance [*Idh 'eva eso lokasmim mūlaṃ khaṇati attano*. Dh. v.297 = In this very existence he destroys his own life at its root.] as well as a long-range trans-*samsāric* significance [*nirayañ ca upapajjati* = He would be born in a degraded state of woe.], while unethical living is stigmatized here itself in this very life as being immoral [*dussīlo itī vuccati* = He comes to be called an immoral person.].

Before we proceed further, I would like to draw your attention to two selections from Buddhist texts with which you should be familiar with unfailing regularity. These, I believe should be in the forefront of your thinking. These instructions offered to you in Buddhism, would definitely prevent you from failing in your duty in every area of public and private life, whether in political leadership from top to bottom, whether as law-enforcement authority ranking high or low, or in domestic accountability whether in single-parent families or otherwise. Here I sample only a few areas of relevance in our day to day life.

They are compiled and presented to us in metrical form, perhaps for the purpose of better retention in memory by everyone. I should boldly say, both by monks and the lay community. Let me first present to you the Anguttara Nikaya version, which has the added virtue of containing references to both life here in this world as well as to what happens in the life beyond. In English it would read:

Whosoever does kill living beings,  
 Whether they be human or animal;  
 And speaks what is utterly untrue;  
 And steals from others their belongings;  
 Indulges in adulterous behaviour,  
 And delights in the use of intoxicants;  
 Without ridding oneself of these five,  
 The corruptive springs of enmity and hate;  
 Such a person is called immoral and foul.  
 After death, to a state of woe he goes.

Translated by the author

*Yo pāṇaṃ atipāṭeti musāvādañ ca bhāsati  
 Loke adinnaṃ ādiyati paradārañ ca gacchati  
 Surāmerayapānañ ca yo naro anuyuñjati  
 Appahāya pañca verāni dussīlo iti vuccati  
 Kāyassa bhedaṃ duppañño nirayaṃ so upapajjati.* A.N.III.205

It is to be noted that the Anguttara in its prose version of the above contains both **bhayāni** and **verāni** together with **appahāya** which means 'ridding oneself of.' Hence we do not suspect any loss of the emphasis on both aspects of self-injury and injury to society which we have discussed in the verses above. The Pali text here points out in addition the evil consequences of such living, both in terms of the present life now and the suffering one must expect in the life after death.

Let us now take a look at the Dhammapada [vv. 246-8] which deals with the same subject from the angle of the **pañca-sīla**, but with a slight difference of emphasis. With a far greater emphasis than in the mere stigma of **immoral** and **foul** [**dussīla**] of the Anguttara, the Dhammapada gives a much more pungent verdict, saying that a person who violates the injunctions of the **pañca-sīla** shall `

dig up his own root [his own grave] in this world ' [*Idh ' eva eso lokasmim mūlaṃ khaṇati attano*. Dh. v.247]. In spite of this difference of emphasis, the Dhammapada does not fail to adequately highlight also the possibility of such a person being dragged down to a lower state of suffering in consequence of his breach of the *pañca-sīla*.

Here is a brilliant case of Pali expression in the Dhamma, the like of which are not too easy to find. Directly addressing the listener, it says: " Let not greed and unwholesome living drag you to protracted misery." Note the Pali: *Mā taṃ lobho adhammo ca ciraṃ dukkhāya randhayuṃ*. Dh. v.248

So far we have discussed only the basic quantum of *sīla*, namely the *pañca-sīla*, with the stress on the negative side of breach. Our texts, which we have discussed so far, also indicate that abstinence from any breach of the precepts of the *pañca-sīla* entitles a person to be called a 'morally good person' or *sīlavā* and confers on him the right to be born in a state of 'good existence' or *sugati*. We note that the best tribute paid to *pañca-sīla*, at the basic down to earth level, is in association with the legendary Universal Monarch or *Rājā Cakkavatti*. Gaining peacefully the ownership of the entire earth for ruling, he advises every ruler at his request that the need for good government is to uphold the observance of the *pañca-sīla* and maintain the morality in land thereby. He emphasizes the absence of need to restructure the form of government. 'Carry on your governments as you have done so far' or 'Enjoy your political status as you have done hitherto' [*Yathā-bhuttañ ca bhujjatha*] is the clear and firm injunction the Cakkavatti delivers to them.

It is tragic and extremely lamentable that in the English speaking world, both at home and abroad, rulers and those who are trusted advisers to them, have not been able to gain access to these gems of thought in Buddhist teachings because of the failure and misdirection of incorrect translations. It is time for Sri Lankan scholarship at least in the Universities, both at graduate and postgraduate levels, to awaken to these in their Buddhist research programming.



T.W.Rhys Davids, in his translation of the Mahāsudassana Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, renders it in 1910 as 'Ye shall eat as you have eaten' [Dialogues of the Buddha, II. 203]. But by 1921, Rhys Davids had doubts about the accuracy of his own translation, and in his translation of the same phrase in the Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta, also of the Dīgha Niāya, offers a new idea as 'Enjoy your possessions as you have been wont to do' [Dial. III.64].

We laud this change as a great triumph of a pioneer, now reaching nearer to the truth. At the same time we have to lament, and warn our readers that Maurice Walshe, in the much acclaimed translation by him of the Dīgha Nikāya in 1987, under the title **Thus Have I Heard**, renders the above phrase in both places as 'Be moderate in eating' [Thus Have I Heard by Maurice Walshe, 1987, pp.81,98]. This translation which is 77 years after Rhys Davids, has now gone into an uncorrected second edition. It goes without saying that with the *pañca-sīla* ethic which the Universal Monarch wishes to propagate, the reference to the rulers about their eating habits seems to make no sense at all.

I have now discussed with you from several different angles the role of *pañca-sīla* in the life of laymen and laywomen. Its relevance to the uplift and well-being of the society around us cannot be over estimated. The very first precept of respect for all living things takes care even of the animal world. A book of American origin like Victoria Moran's **Compassion, the Ultimate Ethic** [Copyright 1997,1991 The American Vegan Society.] shows a definite impact of such thinking on the world at large. On page 29 of this book, Victoria Moran quotes with relishing pride the Buddha in this manner:

**Gautama is reported in the *Dhammapada* to have said, 'A man is not noble if he injures living creatures' and in the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*:**

**To avoid causing terror to living beings, let the Disciple refrain from eating meat ...There may be some foolish people in the future who will say that I permitted meat-eating and that I partook of meat myself, but meat-eating in any**

**form, in any manner, and in any place, is unconditionally prohibited for all.**

Please note Victoria is quoting verse No. 270 of the Dhammapada which runs as follows.

*Na tena ariyo hoti yena pāṇāni hiṃsati  
Ahimsā sabba-pāṇānam ariyo ' ti pavuccati.*

Now I cannot help but call your attention for a little bit of self-examination, self-detection and self-correction. We Sri Lankans, at times both monks and laymen and laywomen, are in the habit of putting the telescope to the blind eye. These Mahayana writers quoted above from the Lankāvatāra Sutra, even though it may not be that the Buddha himself was speaking, did rightly anticipate what Sri Lankan Buddhists would say at this tail end of the twentieth century about the Buddha himself partaking of meat and about the Buddha's last meal of 'tender pork' or *sūkara-maddava*.

Getting back to our subject of the role of *Sīla*, I would be failing in my duty if I do not add here, even as a concluding note, something about the very vital part the Eight Precepts [*Aṭṭhariga-sīla* or *Aṭṭa-sīl*] must play in the life of the lay community. We have by now dealt adequately with the five precepts of *pañca-sīla* and we have no misgivings about any one of us not being fully aware of them. Hence let us turn our attention now to the three additional precepts which constitute the *Aṭṭhariga-sīla* or Eight Precepts.

There are several special features which are to be noted about their composition and their observance. It does not need much argument or persuasion to clarify the Buddhist stand that the *aṭṭhariga-sīla* is laid down in Buddhism to be observed as a full twenty-four hour undertaking. Those who undertake them with honesty and sincerity as well as with adequate awareness have to always remind themselves of this, namely that they undertake to do this both during the day and the night - *imañ ca divasam imañ ca rattiṃ*. It has to be

undeniably so, because the very first additional precept, i.e. No.6 refers to ***vikāla-bhojanā veramaṇī*** or abstaining from meals at night and eating out of hours. This position is clearly defined in the texts as ***rattūparato virato vikāla-bhojanā***. There is hardly any mistaking about this in our texts. See the Dhammika Sutta of the Sutta Nipata, vv 400-401.

*Abrahma-cariyā virameyya methunā  
rattim na bhujjeyya vikāla-bhojanaṃ  
mālaṃ na dhāraye na ca gandhaṃ ācare  
mañce chamāyaṃ va sayetha santhate  
etaṃ hi aṭṭhaṅgikaṃ āh ' uposathaṃ.*

Even a casual look at Precepts Nos. 7 & 8 which generally refer to musical and theatrical entertainment, physical beautification as well as to comforts at bed-time [*uccāsayana-mahāsayanā*] will reveal that they essentially refer to the second half of the day. Hence one's high-level decision, undertaken in the morning to discipline oneself in terms of these, is unpardonably wrecked by the fictitious concept of a ***pavāraṇā*** which many monks and lay persons ingeniously manipulate these days, perhaps unmindful of the consequences. We say with conviction, and we regret to say, that the current organized ***Sīla Samādānas*** and ***Sīla Vyāpāras***, which commence with sun rise and terminate well before sunset, amount to **Nothing ventured nothing done.**

Let us also note with a degree of honesty to ourselves that the observance of the Eight Precepts, in the early days of the Sāsana, was undertaken on all lunar quarters of the month, i.e. the full moon and the new moon and the two quarters of waning and waxing moon. See Anguttara Nikaya I. page 144 f. for more details. With the Sinhalas of Sri Lanka, these were known as ***hatara poya*** or ***poya hatara***. We record with pride and admiration that sections of Buddhists in London are known to be retrieving today this ancient Buddhist habit of observing the lunar quarters under the leadership of the Amaravati Buddhist Vihara. Let us

ourselves resolve to hail the new millennium with the retrieval of this healthy ancient paractice.

***Vayadhammā Saṅkhārā. Appamādena sampādeṭha.***

All conditioned things are liable to perish. Be heedful and do the needful.

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